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# NUCLEAR NOMADS

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Bikini is one of 29 atolls—a ringlike coral island and reef surrounding a lagoon—and five islands that make up the Marshall Islands, the part of Micronesia that the US captured from Japan during World War II.

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The legacy of treating the Micronesians as children is painfully obvious. While devoting millions to social programs, the US neglected the region's economic development. Except for the government bureaucracy, a coconut-oil processing plant, and a couple of construction companies, there is no industry.

There are, however, about 150 federal programs, courtesy of Uncle Sam.

"We have inundated the Trust Territory with federal welfare programs designed to operate in Los Angeles or Chicago, and they've been totally irrelevant to the life and needs and aspirations there," says Jim Berg, a former Peace Corps volunteer on the Marshall Island of Truk who today is the political and economic counselor of the Office for Micronesian Status Negotiations in Washington. "We've altered their basic ability to deal with the concept of self-government and self-determination. We've forced dependency on these people."

Drive the length of Majuro and some of the federal programs are obvious. Their failings often are not. For example, Washington's hot-lunch program for schoolchildren was never designed to make sense in a tropical setting. Over the years of feeding American food to the schoolchildren of the Marshalls, the population has acquired a taste for a menu that bears little resemblance to food they can harvest or produce.

The federal program for the aged may work in Akron, but the Marshallese have extended families that revere and care for the elderly within the family unit. (There is no social stigma attached to children born out of wedlock, and Majuro is awash with children.) Uncle Sam

arrived to help and began sending buses around the island to pick up senior citizens and take them to feeding centers for Chef Boy-R-Dee spaghetti and Skippy peanut butter. "We've taken a federal program and caused the destruction of the veritable sinews of family life," says an observer of the result, which is partially reflected in an abnormally high suicide rate.

It was the desire to remove such social programs and encourage the Micronesians to chart their own destiny that helped to prompt the Compact of Free Association.

"The difficulty of de-colonization, of transforming our relationship with these people from one of being the all-powerful provider to one of being an equal partner—that's a difficult attitudinal transformation for the United States to go through," says Berg, who has worked on the Compact since 1979.

One bureaucratic hurdle involves persuading the Interior Department to let go of Micronesia. If future relations between the Marshalls and the United States are handled almost entirely by the State Department, that's a loss of authority for Interior. And no bureaucracy likes to lose power.

Not everyone in the Pacific is delighted with the Compact, though a plebiscite on the Marshall Islands approved the version that Congress is now debating. The foreign minister of the Marshall Islands, 40-year-old Tony deBrum, is considered one of the most articulate politicians in the Marshalls. Educated in the United States, he says he has difficulty matching the ideals often expressed by the US with political reality.

"The principle of whether a continued military relationship is good or not has been surgically removed from the discussion of the Compact," complains deBrum. "In a sense, we'll continue to be the last American colony. We have no voice in the American legislative system, yet we depend on the United States for our strength and growth. Our major trading partner is the United States, our

school system is fashioned after yours, and you have a big say in our foreign policy.

"I wanted independence to be on the ballot here, but the United States refused. I think the United States should have recognized that we had the right to vote for independence, not just for the right to vote for negotiations leading to independence. What does that mean? Twenty-five thousand years of negotiations again?"

The negotiations for the Compact have taken fifteen years. A 1976 *Washington Post* story by Bob Woodward that reported that the CIA was bugging the Micronesian negotiating team didn't help matters. This summer Congress held hearings on the particulars of the Compact, and Berg says the Reagan administration hopes for implementation by October.

**EXCERPTED**